Best Practices When Communicating about Substance Use Among Youth
A Guide for Drug-Free Communities (DFC) Coalitions

This resource is intended to help Drug-Free Communities coalitions implement evidence-based communication techniques in their work. The following guidelines have been developed and tested by the Frameworks Institute, a non-profit organization that specializes in studying how people understand social issues, and how best to frame them, ultimately shaping effective communications.

- ✓ Consider how the general public understands an issue, and make sure your communication doesn't cue unproductive thinking. Be cautious of inadvertently perpetuating:
  - Stigmatizing norms or attitudes
  - Individualism (the belief that one person is responsible for making healthy or unhealthy choices, regardless of societal factors)
  - Fatalism (the belief that health decisions are inevitable no matter what we do)
- ✓ Focus communications on our shared obligation to youth
  - Adults in a community have a shared responsibility to ensure that the environment is built in a way for youth to thrive.

Avoid saying...	Instead say...
• Youth are to blame for substance use • Experimentation with substance use is inevitable	• The community shares the responsibility of keeping youth safe • Prevention programs in the community can help youth improve their problem solving or coping skills

- ✓ Explain how inequities happen, don't just describe disparities
  - Simply stating a disparity can unintentionally imply that the group experiencing the disparity is at fault. Explain *why* some groups experience disparities, how disparities fit into the larger inequity system, and what can be done about it.
- ✓ Frame adolescence as a time of opportunity
  - When youth are set up to succeed, adolescence can be a time of great opportunity. Describe the social, emotional, and identity development that takes place during adolescence and how these changes can be channeled into healthy activities, when given opportunity and access.
- ✓ Frame data strategically

> **Putting These Guidelines to Work: An Example**
> *"We all share the responsibility to make sure our community is built in a way that allows youth to thrive. When given access to the right opportunities, all youth in our community can grow, take risks, and develop their identities in healthy ways."*

Avoid saying...	Instead say...
• LGBTQ+ youth are at a higher risk of substance use • Youth are doomed to make bad decisions • Youth marijuana use has gone down to 36%	• Youth who are LGBTQ+ may be exposed to multiple of risk factors such as bullying and community violence which can increase their risk of substance use • Prevention programs in the community can help youth improve their problem solving or coping skills • Lifetime use of synthetic marijuana decreased during 2015–2019. The prevalence of lifetime marijuana use increased during 2009–2013 (36.8%–40.7%) and then decreased during 2013–2019 (40.7%–36.8%)

✓ Use metaphors to help tell stories about youth substance use that are easy to understand
- The Frameworks Institute's "Boiling Over" metaphor can help correct misperceptions about adolescent substance use prevention, and the "Foundation of Community Health" metaphor can help explain how community wellbeing is built and maintained.

Additional Resources from CDC

Did you know that there are CDC resources to help you write in plain language? The CDC Clear Communication Index can help you review and score your communication products to ensure you're using plain language that is accessible to everyone.